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### **Through the Gaps of my Fingers: Genre, Femininity, and Cringe Aesthetics in Dramedy Television**

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Review

*Through the Gaps of my Fingers: Genre, Femininity, and Cringe Aesthetics in Dramedy Television*

In the 2015 Emmy nomination procedure, the genre hybridity of Netflix's flagship series *Orange Is the New Black* (Orange, 2013-) was highlighted through its controversial placement in the category of drama, as opposed to its nomination for comedy one year earlier (Andreeva 2015).<sup>1</sup> The show is just one example of many television series varying dramatic and comedic narrative strategies in what can be considered as the emergent genre of "prestige dramedy" on cable television and streaming platforms. Earlier examples like *Weeds* (2005-12), *Nurse Jackie* (2009-15), or *United States of Tara* (2009-11) have been joined by later programs invested in negotiations of complex identity politics such as *Girls* (2012-2017), *Transparent* (2014-), *I Love Dick* (2016), *Master of None* (2015-), *Grace and Frankie* (2015-), *Atlanta* (2016-), *Insecure* (2016-), *One Mississippi* (2015-2017), and *Fleabag* (2016-). Many of these shows partake in a critical celebration of their female protagonist(s), a strategy that Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda, and Diane Negra have associated with post-recessionary serial narratives revising the white male centrality of previous iterations of "quality television" (2016). Further, these programs also function within a cultural climate that genders humor and comedy, as evident in the cultural amnesia regarding the history of female comedians, or in the persistent cultural fascination with the question "can women be funny?" (Rowe [1995], Mizejewski [2014]). By means of these series' frequently humorous approaches to dark subject matter and/or tragicomic portrayals of characters, they invite fluctuating viewing positions that alternate between laughter, uneasiness, and frustration, provoking ambiguous reactions and discussions in social media, journalism, and academic commentary.

This article examines the dramedy's current characteristics as manifest in US-American television culture, with a specific focus on what we deem the *cringe aesthetics* of prestige dramedy. We argue that centralized femininities are pivotal to the use of cringe in such programming, and we turn to half-hour dramedy series *Girls*, *Insecure*, and *Fleabag* to explore their investments in cringe as a

mode of expression tasked with negotiating the tensions between drama and comedy, as well as intersectional relations of identity politics.

The investigation is occasioned by the dramedy's increased popularity in the much proclaimed "Peak TV era" (Garber et al. 2015), and its strategic deployment especially by cable broadcasters (e.g. FX and HBO) and online content providers (Netflix and Amazon Prime) to cultivate industry prestige and audience commitment. We argue that the increased interest in commissioning mainly half-hour prestige dramedies signals television companies' efforts to secure industry status by linking two intertwined textual practices. These are, first, a paratextually and textually foregrounded contrast between drama and comedy aesthetics, and second, a thematization of a range of issues around identity politics. The latter means centralizing the individual's relationship with social-political events and struggles currently dominating public discourses around identity (mostly race, class, gender, sexuality, age and generation, body image, and national belonging) in the global West.

Despite its current popularity, the hybrid televisual format of dramedy is nothing new; its development can be traced back at least to the mid-1990s, when it increasingly became a preferred formula for high-end serial television to engage with what Glen Creeber describes as "the 'private' politics of everyday life" (2004, 116). Creeber identifies a subgenre of "soap drama" (ibid. 115) and argues that it blends generic modes of soap opera, drama, and comedy to engage with individualized, or "micro" identity politics around gender, sexuality, and community. Contrasted with a focus on "grand political issues and wider socio-economic debates" (ibid. 116), and linked to the Women's Movement's historic popularization of the slogan "the personal is political", such "soap dramas" -- or rather dramedies in today's vernacular -- of the 1990s and early 2000s express for Creeber the potential of a radically progressive identity politics in their explorations of personal experience.<sup>2</sup> As Creeber's foundational analysis suggests, much of the form's discursive significance lies in its representational novelty; indeed, subsequent critical discussions of landmark dramedies like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) have revolved around their gender and other politics, widely

understood in feminist media studies as couched in a postfeminist media culture and neoliberal consumerist ethos (e.g. Negra 2004, Arthurs 2003). Dramedy's cultural work is then frequently associated with lifestyle and identity politics in scholarship as well as in public discourses, with less attention paid to specific aesthetic strategies -- beyond a nod toward its hybridization of affective-generic modes -- that enable the relative high cultural standing of these texts. We argue that the currently proliferating half-hour dramedy offers a particularly useful case study to unpick the combined deployment of generic blending and identity politics, since, as will be shown, these female-centered series emphatically use both comedy's cringe tradition, prestige drama's characterization methods, and foregrounded political commentary within the half-hour dramedy context to an extent that effects a notable shift within the form's textual specificities and cultural position. In other words, any exploration of current dramedy's representation and branding of identity politics is well advised to also consider the formats' genre hybridity.

The blending of the aforementioned two aspects - hybrid aesthetics and a socially-politically engaged discourse around identity - can thus be observed in the way prestige dramedy links together TV comedy's established aesthetic practices (and half-hour length) with quality drama's expectation of character "complexity" (cf. Mittell 2015a; Lagerwey et al. 2016). We demonstrate the coming together of these aesthetic and ideological practices in one specific feature of prestige dramedy, namely the cringe comedy tradition's mobilization through "complex" character portrayal. The terms "complex" television and "complex" characterization have become widely employed in television journalism and also lately in academia following Jason Mittell's (2015a, 2015b) influential work on recent shifts in Western television culture's aesthetic and narrative traditions; yet they also remain, along with the designation "quality" television, contested in scholarship for the inherent ideological -- classed, gendered -- value judgements they imply (e.g. Piper 2016, Newman and Levine 2012, Lagerwey and Nygaard 2016). While useful -- and seemingly inescapable -- as a concept to discuss the televisual trend, we indicate the term's roots in popular discourses and its problematic ideological implications via the use of inverted commas throughout the essay. In particular, we

examine how character "complexity", embedded in ideological themes around identity, modifies the "comedy" in cringe, and becomes associated with the more prestigious dramatic mode, this way governing the texts' appeal to cultural value. As such, our investigation engages with the issue of cultural esteem in TV's genre traditions, and the aesthetic practices the prestige dramedy uses and tweaks regarding its "serious" identity themes, to fulfil the imperative of uniqueness in the "Peak TV" era.

### **Dramedy: a thirty-minute drama?**

The proliferation and ambiguous status of contemporary half-hour dramedy have become familiar enough to merit all sorts of popular cultural commentary in the US, not least in comedy culture. Providing a characteristic and revealing instance of such a fascination with the phenomenon, the Hulu comedy series *Difficult People* (2015-2017) develops around the double act of comedians Billy Eichner and Julie Klausner. Following the life of two struggling comics in New York City, the comedy offers a plethora of self-referential jokes about US-American show business. In the episode "Unplugged" (S2 E1), the two leads meet a comedy writer of a (fictional) Netflix series titled *Horse*. Their ensuing dialogue makes direct jabs at, and assumes viewers' familiarity with, the type of half-hour dramedy popularised in online and cable television. Upon Billy and Julie's summary of *Horse*'s plot as "that Netflix show about the single mom who sells heroin to support her trans child's horseback-riding hobby," the writer character proudly adds: "winner of Best Comedy two years in a row" (presumably at the Emmys). In response, Billy can only scoff: "when did comedies become thirty-minute dramas?!"

This scene's mockery of the representational features of current dramedies succinctly characterises the presumed conflict between TV comedy and drama as a problem linked to this new hybrid form's preferred foregrounding of "progressive" identity politics. An intense politicization is evident in this specific fictional series' comically exaggerated focus on socially marginalised identities, gender and

sexuality politics, and its protagonists' (questionable) economic struggles. The satire makes explicit that *Horse's* politically driven and gender-focused storytelling presumes an increased reliance on drama and its associated tonal traditions. Yet, in a likely reference to the above discussed controversy surrounding *Orange*, *Horse's* writer takes pride in the fictional series' nominations for, and awards won in the comedy category, indicating that *Difficult People's* fictional television industry prefers to keep the prestige dramedy *Horse* in the lesser valued, albeit well-recognised comedy box.

The scene then paints a picture in which comedy and drama struggle with each other for cultural validation *within* the hybrid dramedy category, and this conflict surfaces via the pursuit of a type of storytelling that concentrates on political identity issues to appeal to cultural value and significance. This generic struggle goes back to the much-analysed hierarchal and discursively tense relationship between comic and dramatic storytelling, and the former's lower position in aesthetic evaluative traditions. Comedy theory has a long history of grappling with the cultural suspiciousness toward the genre; as Brett Mills argues, this suspiciousness has to do with the fact that the serious mode is "not only prioritised, but normalised" as default in Western "realist" modes of representation. Resultantly, the comic mode is seen as a deviance from such a norm and needs to be clearly signalled by the narrative, and decoded as such by audiences (2005, 22). The tension between presumably light, inconsequential entertainment and the seriousness of artistic expressions of political meanings has also long been at the centre of academic explorations of comedy. Such research illustrates how the relatively low cultural position of comedy may allow for it to channel more transgressive political views than drama does – as evident for example in the proliferation of the political satire form (King 2002, 107) – which accounts for comedy's fruitful relationship with the political (e.g. Mills 2005 and 2009, Hamamoto 1991, King 2002, Boyle 2013 and 2015). However, popular consciousness generally tends to place themes that have strong political undercurrents (especially those around social identity and "lifestyle" politics), or that deal with potentially upsetting, controversial and taboo issues, within drama's narrative tradition – hence *Difficult*

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3 *People's* Billy instantly reacts with the assumption that a contemporary series about a single mother  
4 struggling to care for her transgender child most likely entails more drama than comedy.  
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8 In a combination of the different inheritances of comedy and drama, dramedy is rarely interested in  
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10 "capital P" politics (highbrow drama and political satire are the preferred genres for that), and  
11 instead trades in the politics of the "everyday" (see also Savigny and Warner 2015, 3). Building on  
12 this inheritance and tweaking it, contemporary dramedy pursues cultural value and distances itself  
13 from earlier iterations of the form by association with complex politics around personal identity  
14 struggles dominating US-American public discourses.  
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21 Yet if the preoccupation with such struggles in an increasingly dramatic tone helps these series gain  
22 more cultural currency in critical discourses, their ties to the world of television comedy remain  
23 strong both in terms of aesthetics and production backgrounds. The half-hour length is commonly  
24 associated with Western TV culture's sitcom tradition, providing the basis of the joke in the *Difficult*  
25 *People* scene. Further linking the dramedy to comedy's production practices, current shows are  
26 often developed around a comedian's (usually stand-up) comic persona (e.g. Tig Notaro of *One*  
27 *Mississippi*, Aziz Ansari of *Master of None*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge of *Fleabag*, Louis CK of *Louie* [2010-  
28 2015], Donald Glover of *Atlanta*) and/or rely on autobiographical authorship discourses  
29 characteristic of US-American sitcom traditions of the likes of *Roseanne* (1988-1997), *Ellen* (1994-  
30 1998), *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-), *30 Rock* (2006-2013) etc. In either case,  
31 the strategically thin line between the author-performer's "enacted" and "real" self contributes in  
32 large part to the text's meaning-making (Lena Dunham/Hannah Horvath of *Girls*, Issa Rae/Issa of  
33 *Insecure*). The increased use of cringe aesthetics, which we examine in detail below, further points to  
34 comedy's negotiated presence in prestige dramedy, a presence that the examined series mine for  
35 effect, but also complicate via psychological realism, character "complexity" and foregrounded  
36 political intentions (i.e. cringe moments work not simply as situation or bodily comedy but overtly  
37 appeal to contemporary political sensibilities).  
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A crucial aspect of the dynamic of comedy, drama, dramedy, and cultural value is, and has always been, the profound genderedness of these terms. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's influential work has shown that the historic scarcity of women protagonists in highbrow dramatic forms also speaks to the polarised cultural value of drama and comedy (1995), and following this logic, the unease that this signifies has to do with drama's "genuine" and "realistic" nature as opposed to comedy. Similarly, it is axiomatic in scholarship on Western television genre traditions that feminism's influence on the medium has primarily meant the relative diachronic abundance of women-centred situation comedies but not dramas (Rabinovitz 1999; Dow 1996; Lagerwey et al. 2016). We argue that the contemporary dramedy's depiction of progressive politics within mixed modes of storytelling signals precisely this continued dualism around gendered genres, their representational values, and their perceived relationship to an ideal "realism".

The increased usage of cringe scenes and storylines plays a pivotal part in prestige dramedy's negotiation of the gendered drama-comedy dualism. As we will show, cringeworthy moments, exposing central characters' personal faults or their social environments' shortcomings *as political issues*, help establish links to "quality" television's aesthetic traditions, most conspicuously to its fascination with "complex" central characters, a term often used in critical commentary interchangeably with "antihero" protagonists. Jason Mittell posits that the white male antihero "is part of th[e] trend in complex television" that presents this character as a revelation of making attractive the over-involvement with a subjectivity that is supposed to be abhorrent for audiences, and used to be portrayed that way on television in previous eras (2015b, 74-75). While this is celebrated primarily as an aesthetic-poetic feat of prestige drama (Mittell 2015a) and is also examined for its gender politics (Lotz 2014), the character "complexity" of prestige dramedy frequently attains cultural status through its attachment of political significance to the antihero/ine's characterisation via a cringe aesthetics derived from comedy traditions.<sup>3</sup> Further, the affective resonances of cringe aesthetics have shifted because they are systemically linked to the discussed



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dramedies' heightened centralisation of *female* subjectivities, often in relation to body and sexuality politics (*Girls*, *Fleabag*, *Transparent*, *I Love Dick*, *One Mississippi*).

Another core feature of contemporary dramedy's gendered negotiation of cultural value is its formal connection to millennial half-hour dramedy, which offered increased prestige to female experience and "feminine" themes, as *Sex and the City*'s cultural influence shows (Negra 2004, Hermes 2006, Arthurs 2003). As mentioned, in much feminist scholarship, female experience is here imagined through postfeminist discourse, i.e. through individualised and narrow femininities – "quality" television's imperative of uniqueness and exclusive address is overwhelmingly realised as social, classed, and raced exclusivity. Today's "complex" dramedy no doubt derives in its mixed tone at least from this earlier generation of the format, which concentrated mainly on white middle-class femininities (apart from *Sex and the City*, Showtime's "ladies with problems" programs [Lawson 2010] such as *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie*, and *United States of Tara*, exemplify this group). The discursive evolution of the dramedy format from these predecessors lies in a much-promoted concentration on marginalised identities and complex subject matters' more "realistic" treatment, which is evident for instance in *Girls*' cultural status as "recession-era *Sex and the City*" (Carroll 2012), or in writer-producer Jenji Kohan's promotional discussions of *Orange*. Kohan's oft-quoted statement regarding *Orange*'s mixed generic status in relation to portraying "reality" provides context for the strategic use of cringe aesthetics in contemporary dramedy: "dramas that are only dramatic are a lie, because life isn't just a drama and if you're reflecting reality, part of it should be humorous. When you have just a dry hour, I don't think it's reality" (Fienberg 2013). This defensive quote challenges prestige drama's tonal tradition to demand cultural recognition for Kohan's "authored" dramedy. But more than that, in an assumed binary between humorous reality versus dry artifice, it also aims to allocate cultural prestige to the kind of aesthetic and thematic concerns that drive *Orange* and other dramedies by claiming for them a "realism" based on their comedic rather than dramatic ingredients. As Kohan's claim testifies, "realism" is a slippery term and mobilised flexibly in promotional discourses both as an aesthetic ideal and a means of cultural distinction. Yet, as the

defensiveness of Kohan's claims signals, the "realism" of hybrid storytelling and cringe aesthetics continues to be in dispute in popular discourses. While for *Orange* this mixed cultural status mainly surfaces in the perceived contradiction between hourly episode length, tone, themes, and their relationship to representational "realism" (see Nussbaum 2015), for the majority of dramedy series that use the half-hour format, issues of cultural status revolve mostly around tone (including cringe aesthetics) and generic labelling. For instance, Amazon Prime executive Joe Lewis' statements about the streaming platform's cornering of the market for prestige half-hour dramedy betray an overt effort to reject industry categorisations of its very format. Particularly indicative of institutional concerns around generic designation and cultural value are Lewis's remarks about how he labels - as the interviewer puts it - the "Amazon brand of half-hours that blend comedic and dramatic elements":

I said "traumedy" once, and it kind of caught on. I said it as a joke, but maybe it's not a good word for what we do. There's not a good word for a lot of stuff we do. People like things to be easily understood. Do we make comedies, or do we make dramas? The answer is yes. [...] There's just not a good word for what we do in either tone or form.

(Adalian 2016)

Similar to Kohan's account, Lewis's promotional communication around the category into which these series fit highlights the blurring between comedy and drama as their greatest aesthetic asset. Genre hybridity is thus linked to serialized storytelling as the favoured narration technique of prestige television culture (cf. Kelleter 2017). Lewis's rhetorical differentiation between Amazon's original output and "regular" television (which as his later comments indicate includes sitcom and pure comedy) is a move familiar from the previous twenty-odd years of quality TV culture and institutional branding that started with HBO establishing its "not-TV" brand in the 1990s (Feuer 2007; Leverette et al. 2008; Edgerton and Jones 2009). But here Lewis also stresses the

uncategorizability of Amazon programming, going as far as to say that no generic term is apt to describe these series, evoking *auteurist* discourses of arthouse cinema. He links this ideal of uncategorizability to an ideal of thematic risk-taking (at one point alluding to gender politics as exemplary of thematic risk), as in the following quote: "every show that we do, we ask ourselves, 'Is there a good reason we shouldn't make this?' And if we can't come up with anything, we don't buy that show." (Adalian 2016). The convoluted logic of "we should make this show because we shouldn't make it" in institutional rhetoric around certain programming's exceptionality in an oversaturated television market offers a clear avenue to cringe's attractiveness for such serial narration: the viewer affect mobilised by cringe aesthetics is, after all, that of "I have to look because I cannot look".

### **More Cringe than Comedy? The Cringe Dramedy**

While she leans over the counter of her small guinea pig-themed café and suffers through particularly unsatisfying sex, *Fleabag*'s unnamed protagonist (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) breaks the fourth wall to look directly at the camera with raised eyebrows and comment: "Surprisingly bony... It's like having sex with a protractor" (S1 E3). Meanwhile, *Insecure*'s protagonist Issa (Issa Rae) is dared to rap at an open stage event, after having bragged about her moderate rapping talents – usually only practiced by herself in various bathroom mirrors. Seemingly set up for embarrassment, Issa overcomes her introversion when the concertgoers embrace her vitriolic "Broken Pussy" rap. Far from celebratory, the scene's mood centers around the humiliation and anger that Issa's best friend Molly (Yvonne Orji) feels while watching her perform because the song's lyrics are based on Molly's own dating failures ("Insecure as Fuck", S1 E1). Another unbearable performance occurs in *Girls*' second season, when protagonist Hannah (Lena Dunham) tears open a box of Q-tips and begins to clean her ear canal excessively ("On All Fours", S2 E9). Haunted by her obsessive-compulsive need to perform all actions for a certain amount of times and despite her own discomfort, Hannah pushes the Q-tip further and further into her ear. After what feels like the show's longest twenty seconds, a

disgusting plop sound followed by Hannah's shocked screams – and an emergency phone call to her parents – relieves neither the character nor her viewers.

As may be seen, these three dramedies depict millennial female protagonists who frequently violate social and physical taboos in embarrassing narrative situations, while also failing at communication, exhibiting unawareness of expected social behaviors, and having their self-images diverge from the ways others perceive them. Additionally, these characters' visual portrayals often break with cinema's and television's aesthetic conventions around the female body. Scenes such as those we sketch above contribute to these dramedies' "cringe aesthetics" and serve to complicate notions of gender, genre, and especially viewer affect. In what follows, we explore the narrative practices the female-centered "cringe dramedy" employs to establish prestige through portrayals of the "complex" female character behaving in a cringeworthy manner, and highlight the connection of such scenes to the respective shows' identity politics.

Despite being frequently employed as a buzzword within journalistic criticism, the aesthetics and affects of cringe are noticeably under-explored within film, television, and media studies. As a popular culture phenomenon, cringe can be encountered on websites such as awkwardfamilyphotos.com, the FAIL blog (failblog.cheezburger.com) or the Cringe channel (cringechannel.com). Cringe dominates the work of comedians like Larry David, Sacha Baron Cohen, Sarah Silverman, and Dave Chappelle. Long-running shows like *Frasier* (1993-2004), *The Office* (both the British original [2001-2003] and the American adaptation [2005-2013]), *Seinfeld*, and *The Thick of It* (2005-2012) function as examples of televisual cringe comedy. Additionally, as Anthony P. McIntyre (2016) shows, post-recessionary popular media tends to narrate troubled masculinities via a strategic hybridization of feminized cultures of "cuteness" with cringe comedy's often-misogynist iteration of oversexualized "raunch" and "gross-out" humor. In its feminized representations, the 1990s-2000s postfeminist chick flick is the primary genre that regularly relies on a convergence of cringe comedy and femininity through its heroine's physical humiliations, in this way expressing her

professional and romantic ineptitude, as has been explored in feminist analyses of the genre's Ur-text *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001) and other iterations of the form (see McRobbie 2009; Negra 2009; Bowler 2013).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb "cringe" as: "To contract the muscles of the body, usually involuntarily," as well as "To experience an involuntary inward shiver of embarrassment, awkwardness, disgust, etc.; to wince or shrink inwardly; (hence) to feel extremely embarrassed or uncomfortable" (2017). This suggests that cringing usually entails a physical reaction of discomfort in the observer/viewer. As such, the focus on physicality in Linda Williams' (1991) influential work on "body genres" offers an appropriate starting point for a theorization of cringe aesthetics, and can even be extended through conceptualizing the ambiguous affective responses to cringe. For Williams, body genres like melodrama, pornography, and horror are designed for audiences to experience excessive physical reactions resembling those of the characters on-screen, be it in the form of emotionality, sexual arousal, or fear/disgust, respectively. Similar to cringe dramedy's centralization of female protagonists, Williams emphasizes that it is frequently the female body on which body genres like horror and pornography prefer to display physical (re)actions. In accordance with this argument, cringe also allows for the realization of a cultural crisis about gender in its cultivation of physical reactions of audiences. However, in a divergence and thus complication of earlier body genres, cringe typically requires viewers' affective distance: we do not cringe *with* but *at* characters. Further, responses to cringe humor – if we may indeed call such scenes humorous--function less predictably, since the same scene may result in viewing positions ranging from laughter to frustration to annoyance or disgust. Hannah's Q-tip scene in *Girls* is perhaps most directly linked to Williams' concept from the discussed examples as it abounds in the expression of bodily and abject experience, inviting conflicted viewer reactions.

These female-centered cringe dramedies frequently explore their characters' violations of social and cultural taboos, many of which are particularly constituted as gendered expectations about

appropriate enactments of femininity. As protagonists are often entirely oblivious to their own behavior, the dramedies occasionally position other characters as observing audience surrogates – thus as embodiments of viewers' own assumed cringe responses. During Marnie's (Allison Williams) confident but horrible performance of Kanye West's "Stronger" at her ex-boyfriend's office party in *Girls*, the attending partygoers clearly exhibit different stages of discomfort mirroring viewer reactions (S2 E9). In an analysis of this scene, Lloyd Isaac Vayo demonstrates how white woman Marnie's cultural appropriation of the song results in an entangled politics of race and class (2015). For our purposes, the scene functions as ample illustration of cringe comedy's working mechanism in the series, illustrating cringe as resulting both from social-cultural transgressions, and gendered bodily representations.

This scene further demonstrates how Lena Dunham's star image and the texts associated with her own brand of comedy arguably open up tropes of privileged white womanhood and its violations of social scripts as a source of uncomfortable humor (Sulimma 2017). As the A.V. Club's Todd VanDerWerff (2013) comments on his experience as viewer and critic of the show: "So maybe that – the often-horrifying lack of emotional distance – is what we talk about when we talk about *Girls*. [...] It moves and wrecks and loves and observes, and it never stops trying to push viewers to a point where the 'comedy' falls out of 'cringe comedy.'" Similarly, for Imelda Whelehan the viewing position of "hate-watching" becomes a starting point for an investigation of the ways in which *Girls* "resists the forms of identification and coherent narrative journeys that have become the trademark of postfeminist film and television" (Whelehan 2017, 40).

It is this hybrid management of laughter and disgust, empathy and frustration that distinguishes the female-centered cringe dramedy from male-centered cringe veterans like *The Office*. For Mills the latter functions as "comedy verité" that clearly distinguishes between modes of seriousness and humor through its practice of signaling "its comic intent as quickly and unambiguously as possible" (2004, 66-67). These female-centered dramedies' ambiguous cringe aesthetics are premised on

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3 equally ambiguous audience responses and the desire to share viewing experiences to  
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5 retrospectively find out whether others have similarly responded to a scene as funny, cringeworthy,  
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7 or problematic. The heightened think-piece culture surrounding these shows illustrates such viewing  
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9 sentiments. Instead of courting audience discussions through controversial depictions of violence,  
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11 profanity, or sexuality – a prominent narrative practice of the much acclaimed, overwhelmingly  
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13 male-centered shows of the early and mid-2000s such as *Oz* (2007-2003), *The Wire* (2002-2008), or  
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15 *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), as well as comedies like *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, or *Entourage* (2004-2011)  
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17 – these cringe dramedies court controversy and thus prestige by means of their ambiguously  
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19 cringeworthy female protagonists' behaviors.  
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22 Instead of stylized depictions of sexual acts and erotic desirability, portrayals of female characters'  
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24 sex lives are frequently steeped in cringe aesthetics due to their particular types of (hetero-)sexual  
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26 practices, explicitness, and unsuccessful communications with sexual partners.<sup>4</sup> While indebted to  
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28 the sexual explicitness of shows like *Sex and The City*, the programs we examine here portray a sort  
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30 of "sexual awkwardness" that, as Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant point out, is in *Sex and the City*  
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32 overwhelmingly connected to male characters and rarely involves the female protagonists (2015,  
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34 982). Apart from *Girls*, a series frequently lauded for its portrayal of "realistic" sexual encounters,  
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36 the British series *Fleabag* offers another characteristic take on cringe, female heterosexuality, and  
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38 audience address. In her examination of *Girls*' gender politics, Rosalind Gill has recently called for  
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40 scholarly consideration adjoining *Girls* and *Fleabag* based on the two series' shared investment in  
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42 expressing a "vulnerability [that is] is often so raw that it is painful to witness" (2016, 233).  
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46 Unlike her high-strung, control-freak sister suffering through inappropriate family conversations with  
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48 a nervous smile on her face, *Fleabag* enjoys and thrives on awkwardness in any social encounter.  
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50 While her sister and her father's new partner suffer through a hostile, lengthy conversational silence  
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52 at her deceased mother's "memorial lunch", she even metatextually confides in the viewer, "this is  
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54 my favorite bit", smiling directly at the camera (S1 E5). Robyn Warhol likens the fourth-wall-  
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3 breaking, confessional speeches of *House of Cards* (2013-) protagonist Frank Underwood (Kevin  
4 Spacey) to Shakespearean soliloquies and argues that they place the viewer "in the position of being  
5 a reluctant co-conspirator" (2014, 151). *Fleabag's* asides function similarly, but instead of  
6 legitimating ruthless political power play in highbrow drama's fashion, they turn viewers into  
7 "Fleabag's new best friend", as Emily Nussbaum marvels (2016). Protagonist asides reinforce the  
8 equivocal tone of such scenes in both series and contribute to the formation of ambiguous  
9 "antihero" characters, albeit in different affective and generic contexts. Underwood's Machiavellian  
10 endeavors gain psychological motivations via these asides, this way aligning his portrayal with the  
11 "antihero" trend of the male-centered drama described by Mittell (2015b). *Fleabag's* caustic  
12 commentary on her enjoyment of awkward conversational silence however highlights this series'  
13 emphatic usage of cringe humor, while similarly aiming at psychological depth and viewer alignment  
14 with a morally ambiguous character. Through *Fleabag's* commentary, hesitant viewers engulfed by  
15 the social awkwardness are pushed to find enjoyment in the situation's humor along with the main  
16 character.

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19 As the series progresses, it increasingly undermines the humor of such moments by hinting at tragic  
20 and dark motivations for *Fleabag's* obsession with sexuality and the socially awkward. Through  
21 flashbacks the narrative reveals that an unprocessed mourning of – and blaming herself for – her  
22 best friend Boo's (Jenny Rainsford) death motivate *Fleabag's* behavior. This feature of *Fleabag*, as  
23 well as *Girls'* portrayal of Hannah's obsessive-compulsive disorder, further demonstrates that by  
24 interlinking the often episodic comedy tradition's cringe humor with affective seriality, these  
25 dramedies align themselves with the trend towards "complex characters" to depict "serious"  
26 (psychological) complexities. These scenes render the psychological-political aspect of cringe as  
27 undermining the "simpler" humor of cringe comedy without advocating one affective viewing  
28 response as entirely dominant. Rather, the cringeworthy depiction of personal trauma (*Fleabag*) and  
29 mental illness (Hannah's OCD in *Girls*) alongside these white characters' racial privilege and self-  
30 centeredness foregrounds these shows' investments in gender and sexuality politics. *Girls* and



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3 *Fleabag* also display an effort to distance the usage of cringe from the postfeminist chick flick's and  
4 dramedy's aesthetics and ideology. The morally ambiguous complex character is characterized  
5 through cringe aesthetics, which attaches a heightened prestige to cringe, and makes the portrayal  
6 of "complexity" sufficiently unique in an assumed climate of "Peak TV".  
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### 10 11 12 ***Insecure*: The cringe in race and gender politics**

13  
14 The cringe aesthetic outlined so far develops textually as an attribute of these shows, but cringe may  
15 also result from extratextual viewing positions not intended by either a show or its producers. Such  
16 unintentional cringe can result from too closely following the well-trodden paths of genre  
17 conventions, as a genre-savvy audience responds with sarcasm or annoyance at the clichéd tropes of  
18 body genres like melodrama or horror.<sup>5</sup> In his exploration of "awkward" media products, Jason  
19 Middleton finds that "awkwardness is created by unexpected shifts and ruptures in representational  
20 systems, moments when differing perceptions and investments among filmmakers, social actors,  
21 and spectators are forced into view" (2014, 1). The discourse surrounding *Girls*' lack of racial  
22 diversity critiqued it as yet another televisual narrative centered around white femininities set in a  
23 "white-washed" version of its New York setting – despite seemingly claiming to represent some sort  
24 of universal girlhood in the manner its title implies. Further, HBO's ambiguous promotion of  
25 showrunner Lena Dunham as exceptional due to her gender and generational belonging (Woods  
26 2015, Nygaard 2013) extended the perceived social privilege and entitlement of characters towards  
27 the actresses portraying them and the show's *auteur* figure, Dunham.<sup>6</sup> Following the criticism of  
28 *Girls* and racially insensitive industry practices, the Issa Rae-fronted dramedy *Insecure* allowed HBO  
29 to newly calibrate its brand performance as more inclusive and progressive in regard to depictions of  
30 diversity, echoing Netflix's strategy with *Orange* and also with *Master of None*'s engagement with  
31 Indian American identity. *Insecure* trails writer/producer/actress Rae's precursor web series, *The*  
32 *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (*Awkward*, 2011-2013), in its exploration of "black girl  
33 awkwardness." Both series depict through relatable humor the central character's struggles to  
34 manage her anxiety, desires, and frustrations, while drawing comfort and confidence from close  
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female friendships. Both J, the protagonist of *Awkward*, and Issa are characterized through the series' titles: they feel insecure *and* awkward in social encounters from the workplace to dating, and thus present awkwardness as an alternative to African American stereotypes of coolness and strength (Wanzo 2016, 45). For Regina N. Bradley, Rae's performance follows in a political lineage of the "awkward black woman" in popular culture and functions in contrast to the less openly politicized "quirkiness" of white women in comedy (2015, 150).

In *Insecure*, the narration often follows Issa's perspective through a variety of strategies of internal focalization, such as voice-overs relating her thoughts, rap performances, or daydreams and fantasy scenes allowing Issa to live through her frustration or desire without repercussions.<sup>7</sup> These dream sequences occur without visual cues introducing them and are only retrospectively revealed to be Issa's fantasies. They end with the camera returning to her face and her snapping out of the moment to concentrate on the present. These narrative strategies serve to humorously contrast Issa's reserved, introverted behavior with, for instance, the irritation she feels when cast as the token black person by her white co-workers, or on a date with someone she is either not interested or "too" interested in. A narrative practice well-established in postfeminist cinematic and televisual texts from *Bridget Jones* to *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), the voiceover serves as a site for female self-writing and authorial performance – which *Insecure* extends metatextually through writer-actress Issa Rae's authorship of the show. If voiceover generally functions to establish authenticity, subjectivity, and psychological depth, Issa's voiceovers strengthen the show's commentary on race relations as well.

Similar to *Fleabag*'s soliloquies, *Insecure*'s internal focalization serves to clarify humorous aspects of cringe and allows for coalition-building with viewers. But where *Fleabag* (and *Girls*) employ cringe as resulting from the social and physical transgressions of their female protagonists, and in the process make these characters the cause of cringe with audience surrogate characters mirroring viewer reactions, Issa is a *racialized subject* of cringe: she expresses exasperated bewilderment at the

behavior of those in her social environment as a coping mechanism and survival strategy, and herself mirrors the viewer's own assumed/expected disdain of such actions. Drawing on feminist theories of abjection, Rebecca Wanzo (2016) compares the web series *Awkward* and *Girls* as examples of "precarious-girl comedy". Wanzo convincingly describes different kinds of abjection at play in the two shows and argues that the specific "representational histories of the racialized abjection of Asian, Latina, and African American women" would render problematic in Rae's web series the type of sexual abjection that white woman Hannah and her friends exhibit in *Girls* (ibid. 44). Similarly, *Insecure* shifts cringe from the central character onto her environment and retains Issa's relatability through the aforementioned techniques of internal focalization to narrativize cringeworthy race relations.

For instance, Issa works for the nonprofit organization "We Got Y'All" which aims to mentor underprivileged children and whose logo of a white hand holding the silhouettes of three kids of color is emblematic of her exclusively white co-workers and superior. Acutely aware of both her class privilege and token black person status, Issa is in one scene asked by a co-worker: "Issa, what's 'on fleek'"? Answering in a deadpan voice "I don't know what that means," she leaves the room, rolls her eyes and comments in voiceover: "I know what that shit means. But being aggressively passive is what I do best" (S1 E1). Such scenes position audiences as cringe collaborators, experiencing the same affective responses as the protagonists of color when encountering white characters' racial insensitivities, privilege, or blatant racism. Arguably, the show may address an implied viewer of color in such instances of cringe collaboration, while white viewing positions may also entail cringe at recognizing themselves and their own racial privilege in the unintentionally racist behaviors of these white minor characters. As the show progresses and viewers become accustomed to its use of cringe to explore racial insensitivity, *Insecure* relies less on Issa's perspective. In "Hella LA" (S2 E4), the white police officers who pull over Issa's ex Lawrence (Jay Ellis) are completely oblivious to the tension that the threat of the given situation generates for a black man. Exhibiting his privilege to ignore racial dynamics, the officer jokes amicably about his basketball team having beaten

Lawrence's. Lawrence's calm response, "Yeah, you did. You beat us," subtly refers less to the rivalries of college football and more to the realities of racialized police violence. This scene illustrates the ways in which cringe in *Insecure* is often more prominently related to race than gender. In this regard, *Insecure* might have more in common with the racially aware cringe aesthetics of male-centered shows like *Atlanta* or *Master of None*. These programs equally derive from female-centered prestige dramedies of the recent past but have garnered popularity and acclaim much more unequivocally as witnessed in their wins at the 2017 Emmy awards in comedy categories. They were celebrated in journalistic discourse as triumphs of institutional diversification (Wakeman 2017), while *Insecure* has so far remained unrecognized in award competitions. Since our investigation of the female-centered cringe dramedy does not consider the specific narrative practices of these shows, further academic consideration of the racialized cringe aesthetics of prestige dramedy is needed.

**Conclusion**

This article has identified and undertaken the theorization of a new format of prestige scripted television, the female-centered cringe dramedy. As shown, while the dramedy form is fairly established in Western television as a hybrid genre focusing on "lifestyle" and identity politics, its recent iterations revive this formula by attuning both political commentary, genre hybridity, and characterization technique to contemporary trends of "complex" television. We have argued that this format strategically mobilizes and modifies the effects of established "cringe" comedy to imbue it with politicized cultural value. The article has explored some of the format's core narrative practices in order to demonstrate the ways in which it frequently expresses this politicization via disturbing gendered expectations of mediated femininity, and specifically body and sexuality politics. Yet these programs' overt investment in protagonist "complexity," an expected feature of prestige television, shows significant variance in their relation to race politics. Hence, their mobilization of cringe is affected by the central female characters' cultural positions as raced (and classed) subjects.

This is quite prominent in a comparative examination of *Girls* and *Insecure*: as shown, the former's focus on millennial white femininities frequently deals in sexual and bodily cringe sequences that observe and scrutinize the troubled psychologies of relatively privileged young white women. In contrast, *Insecure* uses cringe aesthetics mostly to expose the racially loaded social environment of the black female heroine, allowing the audience to experience Issa's own feelings in racialized cringe moments. Thus, while cringe aesthetics in *Insecure* work toward a direct critique of white culture by positioning the black female protagonist as the one experiencing cringe when faced with ignorance of black subjectivity, *Girls*' critique of whiteness is mostly implicit in its female protagonists' positioning as the *objects* of cringeworthy moments. Cringe sequences in *Girls* and *Fleabag* often thematize female ambivalence toward socially expected expressions of heterosexual desire, which gain specific importance in the programs' efforts to communicate "complex" femininity. In both cases, ambiguous viewer responses and physical reactions are central to the strategies of these series' meaning-making. Channeled through ambiguous character morality and identification, the series are thus aligned with prestige television's valorization of textual polysemy. Above all, within the current cultural moment the prestige dramedy has emerged as a format that allows the post-network television industry to attain renewed cultural relevance through the ambiguous, muddy representations of femininities linked prominently to the heightened pleasures and pains of cringe aesthetics.

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<sup>1</sup> The Television Academy tellingly tried to avoid such genre-based categorization through the introduction of categories based on the running time of programs' individual episodes regardless of narrative content. Popular and industry discourses predictably translated this new categorization back into the categories of comedy and drama.

<sup>2</sup> Creeber's case studies include both British and US-American series -- even though he does not comment on this -- suggesting a parallel cultural formation of the dramedy as a genre in these two countries. This transatlantic and cross-cultural circulation of the form has massively increased in the digital age (Lagerwey and Nygaard 2017), as our inclusion of *Fleabag*, a program commissioned for the BBC but co-produced and distributed in the United States by Amazon, indicates. Crucially, much of the cultural commentary and attention focused on *Fleabag* has emerged in the US-American context, allowing for its inclusion in our discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Even though further consideration lies beyond the scope of this piece, the notion of the female antihero/antiheroine has featured significantly in recent television scholarship (e.g. Buonanno 2017), predominantly regarding possible continuations of, or divergence from, the complex male antihero of prestige television. Other scholars have contested such links and argue that female antiheroes may rather be indebted to entirely different televisual traditions as for instance ambiguous female villains in soap opera and melodrama (see roundtable discussion: Mittell 2015c).

<sup>4</sup> Sexual miscommunication functions as a prominent aspect of the female-centered cringe dramedy, yet takes specific forms in the different shows that we analyze. In *Girls*, Hannah doesn't assert herself against Adam's porn-inspired fantasies but is fascinated by them, without actually expressing her own autonomous sexual desires. *Fleabag*'s protagonist confides in the imagined audience rather than in her sexual partners, similarly observing but also mocking heterosexual male desire and sexual practices. And while *Insecure*'s Issa expresses her sexual desires, issues of consent and communication surface for instance in a controversial oral sex scene during which her partner ejaculates on her face (S2 E6).

<sup>5</sup> The other body genre that Williams outlines, pornography, deals rather differently with repetition and recognition, as Sarah Schaschek's (2014) work on pornography and seriality illustrates.

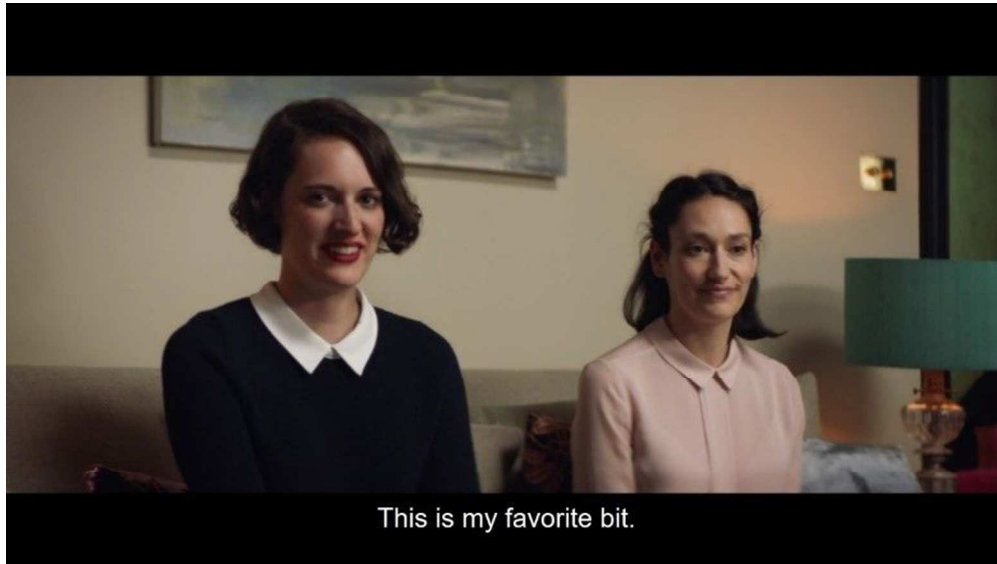
<sup>6</sup> Further, scholarship has explored how *Girls* is paratextually framed by Dunham's (celebrity) feminism (cf. Nygaard 2013, Woods 2015, Seaton 2017, Sulimma 2017, Whelehan 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Unlike the bathroom as simultaneously a space of non-sexualized female intimacy and physical cringe moments in *Girls* (Adam urinates on Hannah, Hannah ruptures her eardrum), for *Insecure* the bathroom solely functions as a safe stage for Issa to vent and amp herself up. This also illustrates the respective shows' different approaches to cringe as located in different areas of social interaction.



Likely one of the most cringeworthy scenes in "Girls", the Q-tip incident illustrates the affective dimensions of physical cringe for audiences.

73x41mm (300 x 300 DPI)



"Fleabag"s unnamed protagonist thrives on social awkwardness and directly addresses viewers to partake in her enjoyment of cringe.

78x44mm (300 x 300 DPI)



The bathroom provides "Insecure"s Issa with a safe space to process the cringeworthy behaviors of her co-workers.

75x49mm (300 x 300 DPI)